



A Primal Spirit Ten Contemporary Japanese Sculptors

An exhibition
organized by the
Los Angeles County
Museum of Art
and the
Hara Museum
of Contemporary
Art, Tokyo

Robert O.
Anderson Building,
Plaza Level

Los Angeles County
Museum of Art

June 17–
August 26, 1990

Koichi Ebizuka

Toshikatsu Endo

Chuichi Fujii

Tadashi Kawamata

Kazuo Kenmochi

Takamasa Kuniyasu

Emiko Tokushige

Shigeo Toya

Kimio Tsuchiya

Isamu Wakabayashi

A Primal Spirit Ten Contemporary Japanese Sculptures

A Primal Spirit explores a direction within Japanese art today that is unique in contemporary art internationally. The large works presented here, most of which were created specially for this exhibition, are created from natural materials—wood, metals, minerals, fiber, stone—and have a rugged, elemental appearance that reflects each artist's response to nature and the attempt to engage the forces and great cycles in nature. Though these forms may appear radical to Japanese and Western viewers alike, the sculptors in *A Primal Spirit* draw upon ideas and aesthetics that are not only traditional but dominant in Japanese art.

For example, most of the artists in *A Primal Spirit* share a belief that man is integral with nature, that the work of art is the locus of the artist's spiritual encounter with natural forces, and that the artist works with his materials primarily to express the material's inner essence rather than to express the artist's own will. Such attitudes are held by many Japanese artists and recall the beliefs of Shinto, Japan's native religion since prehistoric times. Also inherent in these works are Buddhist concepts that the art work represents a microcosm of the universe and that the function of art is essentially meditative.

These deeply ingrained concepts and attitudes in Japanese culture have a profound effect on the ways the artists in *A Primal Spirit* envision their art and their activities as artists. In order to properly experience the works in *A Primal Spirit* and to appreciate the significance they have for the artists who created them, it is helpful to explore some of the fundamental artistic concepts that inform their art—particularly their ideas about material, form, and process—and how they may differ from Western concepts.



Emiko Tokushige

Japan, born 1939

Untitled

1987

Palm fiber, palm rope,
cotton, and urethane foam

Two of seven pieces:

sizes range from 19 5/8 x 35 3/8 x
45 1/4 in. (50 x 90 x 115 cm)

to 44 1/4 x 47 1/4 x 82 1/4 in.

(112 x 120 x 210 cm)

Collection of Gunma

Prefectural Museum of

Modern Art, Japan

Materials

Generally speaking, Japanese artists have a very different conception of materiality from Western artists. Whereas Western artists tend to view the mediums they work with as raw materials simply to be manipulated as they determine or as “blank slates” intended to receive the imprints of their wills, Japanese artists are more likely to regard their chosen materials as things to be understood or engaged in their own right. Often they describe their materials, particularly natural ones like wood or stone, as having an “inner essence” that they engage through their manipulations, almost as if they were contending with a life force. Indeed, many of the artists in *A Primal Spirit* do describe a “force” or “presence” within their materials, and they tend to envision the art object as the locus and expression of their engagement of that “inner essence.” This concept, while secular, suggests a spiritual dimension to their understanding of materials and may ultimately derive from traditional Shinto beliefs that a spirit or deity may dwell in such natural objects as stones, trees, mountains, or even bodies of water like streams or waterfalls.



Koichi Ebizuka
Japan, born 1951
Related Effect S-90LA
1990
Wood and coal
100 3/8 x 24 1/2 x
30 3/8 in.
(255 x 623 x 770 cm)
Collection of
Galene Tokoro, Tokyo

Kazuo Konomochi
Japan, born 1951
Untitled
1990
Sculpture: wood and paint
129 7/8 x 496 x 110 1/4 in.
(330 x 1,260 x 280 cm)
Drawings:
oil on photograph
196 x 12 1/2 in.
(498 x 310 cm)
Collection of the artist
This work was made
possible by a grant from
the Lannan Foundation.

Form

In modern Western art the form of an object is understood as the sum of its absolute physical properties: its structure, its shape, its material makeup, and so on. And though Western artists acknowledge that an object may be transformed or deteriorate over time, they generally define form in opposition to chaos and change: form is complete and static, the final product of many artistic decisions. By contrast, form in Japanese sculpture is conceived to be generated by flux itself. The notion of completion is antithetical to much contemporary Japanese art, in which the outward physical manifestation of an object is understood to reflect a moment in an ongoing process. Most of the works of art in *A Primal Spirit* are not presented as absolute structures but as synthesized arrangements of many divisible parts gathered into a discernible mass or configuration. They are complex groupings of interdependent parts, and their overall organization is calculated to reveal the relationship of the whole to its parts and of each part to every other. It is crucially important to the artists that their works be perceived less as "things" or objects than as arrangements in which the whole is understood as the sum of its individual parts. Though the artists in *A Primal Spirit* intend their works as secular and non-religious, their concepts of form echo basic tenets of both Shinto and Buddhist thought in which the macrocosm or plan of the whole universe can be understood through a perception of its individual parts.

Process

For the artists in *A Primal Spirit* arrangement, or the process of organization, may be more important than the particular shape or structure that results. For some the form may be a simple, predetermined geometric shape—a circle or a cube; for others, the form is unplanned or even accidental, evolving as they respond to the physical properties of the materials and the site in which the work is situated. But all of the artists presume that their works are fragments within a greater natural order, which is revealed through their art. Aspiring to reveal through their art the universality and completeness of nature and man's place in nature, they conceive their works as susceptible to and engaged in the conditions of nature, even if that ultimately results in the destruction of their works by natural decay or other forces of change. Statements such as Koichi Ebizuka's that "it is sufficient for a work to last for only a moment" or Takamasa Kuniyasu's "I never think of my work as something that will last forever...[and] I don't mind if, in the end, a work crumbles and decays" suggest that the completeness of their works of art is not to be found only in the integration of separate parts into an organized arrangement but also in its *dis*-integration into fragments or debris. Their affirmation of the impermanence of their works reflects a widely held Buddhist understanding of the universe as being in a perpetual state of flux. For many of these artists the viewer's recognition of the mutability of their works is as important to the proper



Tadashi Kawamata

Japan, born 1953

Primal Project II

1990

Wood and paint

Indoor section:

236¼ x 419¼ x 265¼ in.

(600 x 1,065 x 675 cm)

Outdoor section:

204¼ x 748 x 141¼ in.

(520 x 1,900 x 360 cm)

Collection of the artist

This work was made

possible by a grant from

the Lannan Foundation.



Kimio Tsuchiya

Japan, born 1955

Silence

1990

Used wood, driftwood,
and magazines

118½ x 228½ x 39½ in.

(300 x 580 x 100 cm)

Collection of the artist

This work was made

possible by a grant from

the Lannan Foundation.

Chuichi Fujii

Japan, born 1941

Untitled

1985

Installation view,
Los Angeles County Museum
of Art

Japanese cypress

118 x 145¼ x 114¼ in.

(300 x 370 x 290 cm)

Los Angeles County Museum

of Art, given anonymously

Photograph: Steve Oliver



understanding of their art as the immediate experience of the physical form of the works themselves.

These fundamental concepts of material, form, and process reflect an innately Japanese sensibility and are the basic inspiration for the artists' aspiration to reveal a universality through their art. Toshikatsu Endo states that "my works are not markedly individual in appearance. They are not the result of a desire to express my individuality. Rather I feel that they are something more universal." Endo often chooses the form of the circle, which he describes as "the simplest and most primordial form," to express a universality. Though not all of the



Toshikatsu Endo

Japan, born 1950

Lotus

1990

Earth, air, sun, water,
fire, and wood
29½ x 141¾ (diam.) in.
(75 x 360 cm)

Collection of the artist

Takemasa Kuniyasu

Japan, born 1957

Return to Self

1990

Ceramic, wood, and steel
wire

315 x 275½ x 590½ in.
(800 x 700 x 1,500 cm)

Collection of the artist
This work was made
possible by a grant from
the Lannan Foundation.

artists in *A Primal Spirit* choose such basic shapes for their works, like Endo they envision their art less as an expression of the self than a reflection of a universality in which the individual participates. For example, Kuniyasu, whose stacked constructions of ceramic blocks and logs may sprawl irregularly over large surfaces or spire upward to form rugged towers, asserts that "I am trying to find a form of expression that allows me to feel the self as a single part of a greater circle. . . . It is perhaps an interpretation of the world or of the universe, the cosmos, that I want to create." Indeed, all of the artists in *A Primal Spirit* affirm the concept that their works are connected with the world beyond the art object, and they see their works as functioning within the larger context of the physical world, encompassed in nature and its great cycles through time and space, and integral with the created universe.

The Artists

The ten artists in *A Primal Spirit* are native Japanese. Most are in their thirties; their ages range from thirty-three (Kuniyasu) to fifty-four (Isamu Wakabayashi). Emiko Tokushige, the only woman whose work is represented in this exhibition, is among a growing though still small number of women in the Japanese artists' community, which until recently had been populated almost exclusively by males. Some of the artists in *A Primal Spirit* have lived for periods in London, Paris, or New York, but all of them currently make their homes in Japan, mainly in the cities of the island's eastern shore. Several have exhibited their work in the West—Tadashi Kawamata has shown the



Shigeo Toyu
Japan, born 1947
Woods II
1989-90
Wood, acrylic, and wood ash
Thirty pieces, each
86 3/4 x 12 1/4 x 12 1/4 in.
(220 x 31 x 31 cm)
Collection of the artist

Isamu Wakabayashi
Japan, born 1936
Sulfuret Garden—A Distant Imagery
1989
Copper, sulfur, and steel
Copper drawings:
105 1/2 x 39 3/8 in.
(268 x 100 cm) or
99 1/4 x 39 3/8 in.
(252 x 100 cm)
Sulfur columns:
59 1/2 x 21 1/4 x 25 3/8 in.
(151 x 54 x 64.5 cm)
plus steel bases
Collection of Akira Ikeda
Gallery, Tokyo

most extensively in Europe, South America, and New York City—but for the most part, their work is not well known outside Japan, and a few are only now becoming known to Japanese art audiences.

These artists work independently of each other, and they do not constitute a group or a “movement” in their own minds or anyone else’s. Indeed most of them had never met one another nor known of one another’s art before this exhibition was organized. Their art forms, however, as well as their ideas and attitudes about their art, have clear affinities. The concept for this exhibition was suggested not by any predetermined criteria but by the strong visual and formal relationships discernible in their art, correspondences that were confirmed by the remarkably similar statements of outlook and philosophical attitude that were expressed by the artists themselves in individual interviews with the exhibition’s organizers.

The Exhibition

It is impossible for a single exhibition to characterize accurately the state of contemporary Japanese art: the range of activities is too diverse and the pace of developments too rapid. It is a testament to the vitality of the Japanese art world today that to know it at all, we must focus on aspects of it. *A Primal Spirit* explores only one of the many active currents that could be identified within that lively milieu, but it represents a thrust in Japanese art that is unique in contemporary art internationally.

Focusing on a single aspect of internationally significant Japanese art today, *A Primal Spirit* may be understood to position itself differently from other Western exhibitions, some still current, of contemporary Japanese art. Historically, there have been very few major exhibitions of new Japanese art organized by American museums in the four and a half decades since the end of the Second World War. The few large American-organized shows exploring recent Japanese art have been surveys, selected deliberately to reflect Western influences and presenting recent Japanese art as if it were an outpost of contemporaneous Western art. Such an approach mocks the West’s own high valuation of originality and fails to recognize what is authentic in a foreign culture.

In contrast, *A Primal Spirit* attempts to present work by ten contemporary artists on its own terms, that is, as original and progressive artistic expression, distinctive in the world today and authentic to Japanese visual culture. The curatorial aim of *A Primal Spirit* is not to isolate or filter away this indigenous Japanese contemporary art form from Western contemporary art but, quite the contrary, to introduce it internationally and to expand Western concepts of contemporary art and the critical dialogue surrounding it. Only by recognizing the cultural differences, as well as the similarities, that inform various currents within today’s global art scene, can we come to deeper insights and a truly international appreciation of contemporary art wherever in the world it may be created.

Related Events

Programs are free to museum members and included in the admission fee for the general public unless otherwise noted.

Docent Tours

Docent tours of the exhibition are offered Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Saturdays, June 19–August 25, at 1 p.m.. Tours meet in the plaza level foyer of the Robert O. Anderson Building.

Curator Walk-throughs

Wednesday, July 11, and Thursday, July 19, at 9:30 a.m. These informal talks by Howard N. Fox, curator of the exhibition, are open only to museum members. Each talk is limited to fifty people; reservations can be made by phoning (213) 857-6100. The Wilshire Boulevard entrance to the museum opens at 9:25 a.m., and the walk-throughs begin in the plaza level foyer of the Robert O. Anderson Building.

Symposium

"A Primal Spirit: Recognizing Japanese Art Today"
Saturday, June 16,
9:30 a.m.–12:30 p.m.
Dorothy Collins Brown
Auditorium

This panel discussion, coorganized by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the consulate

general of Japan in Los Angeles, will explore the challenge of understanding the rapidly growing world of contemporary Japanese art from a Western viewpoint. Participants include Toshio Hara, founder and director of the Hara Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo; Takamasa Kuniyasu, a sculptor represented in the exhibition, *A Primal Spirit*; Louisa McDonald, historian of Japanese art and professor at Mount Holyoke College; and others. Howard N. Fox, the museum's curator of contemporary art and coorganizer of the exhibition, will moderate the program. This event is free to all. The Wilshire Boulevard entrance will open at 9:20 a.m. Seating is limited; reservations can be made by phoning (213) 857-6022.

Lectures

Leo S. Bing Theater

Sunday, July 1, 1 p.m.

"A Primal Spirit"
Howard N. Fox, curator of contemporary art, Los Angeles County Museum of Art

Sunday, August 19, 1 p.m.

"A Distant Mirror:
Japanese Art Today"
Lynn Gumpert, former senior curator, New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York; currently U.S. coordinator, Sydney Biennale

All photographs are by Tadasu Yamamoto except as noted.

All images are views of installations at the Hara Museum ARC, Gunma Prefecture, Japan, except as noted.

A catalogue of the exhibition *A Primal Spirit*, featuring essays about Japanese art today, the concept of the exhibition, statements by the artists, extensive color illustrations, and biographical and bibliographical reference sections, is for sale in the Museum Shop.

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